

LETTER
TO
THE LORD BISHOP OF LINCOLN,
RESPECTING THE
“REPORT FROM THE CLERGY
OF
A DISTRICT
IN THE
DIOCESE OF LINCOLN.”
IN WHICH REPORT
THE INCREASE OF METHODISM
IS CONSIDERED AS A CAUSE
OF THE
DECLINATION OF RELIGION.

BY CURSITOR.

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1800.



LETTER, &c.

MY LORD,

AT length, I understand, that Mr. MICHAEL ANGELO TAYLOR has relinquished his intention of introducing into Parliament the New Toleration Bill, of which he long since gave notice, and has left the Legislature entirely open to yourself. And from

the activity you have lately manifested upon this subject, and the zeal with which the Clergy in your own Diocese, and at your own particular instigation, have associated to determine on the best means of extricating the Church from her present contempt and universal desertion, there can be no doubt but you will readily avail yourself of the present vacancy, and obtain possession of the House by an immediate notice or motion. But before you thus act, it may be wise, perhaps, to pause for one moment longer, and to enquire whether the plan, about to be pursued, be in the first place necessary ; and, in the second, judicious and politic ? Whether, in reality, it may not tend rather to de-

deteriorate, than assist the sacred cause in which you are embarked ?

The REPORT, which purports to have been drawn up by the Clergy of your own Diocese, and which has the honour of being addressed to yourself with much filial duty and affection, I mean to regard as authentic ; although in itself it is deficient in every requisite of authenticity, and is ushered into the world without a name, without a date, and without a place of convention. It complains strenuously, and I apprehend justly, of the *declension of religion*, and the dreadful desertion of every parish church by its parishioners ; and it attributes these deplorable effects to three grand and primary CAUSES :

1st, The superfluity of public houses, and their being crowded with visitants on Sundays, together with fairs and wakes that are permitted in the same periods ; and the general custom of all persons engaged in the trade of buying and selling cattle, of examining the flocks and herds that arrive on these days in the vicinity of market-towns, and are ready for the market of the ensuing morning.

2dly, The *great increase of itinerant preachers*, who seduce the country into an attendance upon them by the boldness of their assertions, and the novelty of their manner ; and by condemning to eternal perdition every one whose religious creed deviates from their own.

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And, 3dly, The extreme relaxation of church discipline which has gradually taken place among the great body of the Clergy themselves, the total neglect of all family and private exhortation, and the frigidity with which they engage in the public duties of the Sabbath ; the whole of which these Reverend Reporters most sincerely bemoan, and concerning which they solemnly covenant with each other to exhibit a different conduct in every respect.

We are next favoured with the REMEDY proposed by the gentlemen of this Clerical Committee, and which they humbly submit to your Lordship to introduce before the Legislature. And this remedy is nothing

less than a law, prohibiting, in a severer manner than any at present existing, the profanation of the Lord's day; and containing restrictions which, if carried into full effect, would not only eradicate all itinerant and methodist preaching from the world, but would effectually preclude the existence of any public dissenting worship whatever, and hereby totally destroy the very tenor and spirit of the *Act of Toleration*.

Now, with respect to the first part of this proposal, it is obvious to the most superficial novice in *Burn's Justice*, that it is *not for want of existing laws* that improper sports and businesses are engaged in, or that taverns, tea-gardens, and public-houses, are

are kept open during divine service, but for want of the *regular enforcement* of those laws. Why, then, croud the statute-book, and burden the memory of the people with additional enactments, when the present are altogether competent and to the point? That such abuses exist is not owing to the deficiency of the Legislature, but to the negligence of the Magistrates*. This, indeed, is so ob-

vious

* Some of the inhabitants of the metropolis, anxiously concerned for the welfare of Society, lately waited upon a Magistrate with a plan to rid their neighbourhood of swarms of most abandoned prostitutes which infested it; but his worship (although himself the father of a large family) with simpering marks of disapprobation of their intention rejected the proposal, and coolly replied nearly in these words—" To be sure, if it become a griev-

vious, and so little stress appears to be laid on this part of the proposal by many of its most zealous advocates, that I cannot but conceive the Methodists are perfectly justified in regarding it as the mere prologue to what immediately follows, and which would have appeared too daring and invidious without some such introduction as the present.

To this succeeding part of the proposal, then, I shall take the liberty,

ance altogether intolerable, it might be proper to put *some restraint* upon it, and the regular officers (meaning the watchmen) should be *told of it*. But, perhaps, *none of us* (said the worthy Justice) *wish entirely to remove a sort of necessary evil.*" And accordingly that neighbourhood still remains a disgrace to the city of London.

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my Lord, of attracting your attention principally; and, although not a Methodist myself, but a friend to universal toleration and religious liberty—I ask you seriously, and as a Minister of the Gospel of CHRIST, on what text of the New Testament do you ground your right of precluding any man from believing in the Gospel, or from preaching it in whatever way appears most consistent with the dictates of his own conscience?—“ But these men are devoid of all education, it seems—and they pursue other employments at the same time.” Will the New Testament justify you in suppressing them on these accounts?—Are there no examples to be adduced of similar facts in the first and purest periods of the Christian æra? They

may not, perhaps, have studied your Lordship's *Elements of Christian Theology*, but they may have studied those of St. PAUL, which are not quite so voluminous, and equally as clear.— “ But they are pretenders to exorcism.” This I much doubt, notwithstanding the assertion in the Lincolnshire Report. If they be *mere pretenders*, they are *impostors*; and, as such, in the *present system* of English law, amenable to the civil magistrate. If they be *more than pretenders*; if, in *reality*, they can put to flight the herds of evil spirits by which the nation is *demoralized*, in the name of GOD, bid them all-hail, and encourage their pious and patriotic labours. “ They condemn to eternal perdition every sect whose religious creed happens to deviate

deviate from their own." This, undoubtedly, is highly wrong, illiberal, and anti-christian. But, even if this be true, which is much to be doubted, from whence did they adduce the example for such a conduct? Have we never heard of a church that compels her ministers, as an act of duty, to promulgate aloud, on stated days, the chief articles of her own faith, and to declare that all who do not believe such articles *shall, without doubt, perish everlastinglly?* If, in reality, it be a duty incumbent upon Christians, and our own church by its practice asserts that it is, in this manner to damn one another in the gross, the Methodist has surely as much right to damn the Churchman, as the Churchman has the Socinian, or the Catholic all the former together. Yet,

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in fact, the doctrines of Methodism will seldom be found to differ in any essential point from those of the Establishment; and it is the grand boast of the majority of its professors that they thus assimilate.—“ But they are men “ of vulgar manners, and even fre-“ quently of immoral lives, and who “ do not adorn the doctrine they in-“ cultate.” As the kingdom of hea-ven is open to the *vulgar* as well as the *polite*—the inhabitants of St. Giles’s as well as those of St. James’s—there can be no more reason for precluding the man of vulgar manners from delivering his harsh and home-spun exhortations, than the minister of polite address from exhibiting himself in his more polished mode. The theatric harangues, or moral essays, which constitute the ge-
nerality

nerality of our Sunday discourses in this metropolis, are but little calculated to convince the judgment or influence the heart of the great body of the *Swinish Multitude*. Let them, then, without obstruction, possess ministers of their own; ministers who can employ their own language, enter into their own feelings, and are acquainted with their own infirmities and vices. But with respect to the assertion, too common I well know in all our polished circles, that these Methodist reformers are frequently men of immoral lives themselves, as a *general* proposition, I cannot for one moment admit it. Your Lordship, and your Lordship's clients, assert that they are followed with more zeal, and listened to with more attention, than any other order of preachers

whatever. But this, I humbly conceive, could not be for any permanent period of time, if this *general* charge of immorality were founded in fact. Mankind are not with ease made universally the dupes of doctrines uncombined with practice: there is a spirit of curiosity, even where that of malice does not exist, of prying into the daily events and habits of every public character, and of narrating them on every public occasion; and, were this proposition true, the evil would work its own remedy, and the preacher be without followers. It is highly probable that the assertion will apply to *some* of this itinerant class of instructors; for it is impossible for a large body of any description to exist, of which every individual shall be alike pure

pure and impeccable. But the Reverend Writers of this Report are *by no means authorised* to rise up and *throw the first stone*, since in this very report they acknowledge, and lament, that moral inconsistency of character is too often to be met with *even among themselves*, and enumerate *this very fact* as one cause of the desertion of their churches, and the declining state of religion among their audiences. Of the existence, indeed, of this fact, *there can be no doubt*; and as little doubt can there be but that, if the repentance which they now profess be sincere—if a greater degree of zeal for the Christian religion be manifested in the presence of their parishioners—if ardour and seriousness be the genuine characteristics of the pulpit, and judicious and seasonable expostulation be frequently imported into domestic life—if, in fine, in all these

these instances, they become *close copyists of the very teachers whom they condemn*, they will destroy the existence of all field-preaching whatsoever; their parish churches will become as crowded as they now are confessedly vacant; and the necessity will be totally superseded of applying to Parliament for the possession of new powers.

There is indeed an extreme degree of awkwardness in the application of *these gentlemen* under the circumstances of their own Report. If, in every *inferior court*, it be requisite that the complainant should enter it with *clean hands*, to assure him success in the object of his petition, how much more expedient is it that in the *paramount Court of Parliament* the Petitioners applying for assistance and additional

grants of power, should demonstrate, as the ground of their success, that the conduct they have hitherto exhibited has been altogether unexceptionable and praise-worthy ! But what say their own book and their own testimony in the present instance ? will your Lordship dare to unfold it, and read the severe sarcasm they have cast upon themselves, and then make it the immediate basis of a bill in their favour ? *will your Lordship, after proving to the House that all the evils they complain of are the offspring of their own negligence and misconduct, move, that the Legislature assist them in the difficulties which have from hence alone arisen, and that men who have neglected the powers actually entrusted to them, be now rewarded with a fuller authority and more competent means of abuse ?*

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The present application, therefore, appears to me not only to be absolutely unnecessary, but highly impolitic and injudicious; and it is so not only with respect to the parties applying for relief, but with respect also to those of whom the complaint is made. The Methodists, perhaps, compose among themselves the most powerful affiliated society in existence; their number is prodigious; and the discipline to which they submit concentrates them into a body as compact as that of the Quakers. Hitherto they have uniformly, (for the exceptions are not worth noticing,) supported the political views of the Cabinet; and, in the most perilous times of the State, have been of essential service in maintaining subordination

ordination and loyalty* ; while, with respect to their religious principles, none of them are adverse to the national church, and by far the greater part of them are express members of it. Is it now a due reward for their patriotism that such an opposition should be uselessly excited against them ? or, in the full confidence of a sanguinary temperament, do you apprehend that no evil is to be dreaded from converting a million of steady friends into a million of inveterate enemies ? Is it a conduct politic or judicious ? and will your friend the Chancellor of the Exche-

* The late Mr. Wesley, in the American war, as particularly appears by his publications, most strenuously vindicated Ministry, and at all times used his influence (which was not a little) in the support of Government.

quer be prevailed upon to support you in it?

Yet it is not the Methodists alone whom you have hereby irritated, but every class and denomination of more regular and consistent Dissenters. In the conduct that has lately been exhibited by the former in *recruiting*, if I may so say, for converts throughout almost every town and village in the country, there may perhaps be more zeal than judgment; and the Presbyterians and Independents have suffered as much from the sound of this new *drum ecclesiastic*, and perhaps more than the parish churches themselves; several of their societies having been hereby totally subverted and led astray. A considerable degree of animosity was in consequence thereof, beginning to exhibit

exhibit itself between these latter and the former. But mark the effect of the intemperate resolution now taken. The Dissenters feel themselves attacked as well as the Methodists; and instead of making a common cause with the hierarchy against these innovators upon their principles and their discipline, they have been compelled to change sides, to unite themselves with the Methodists, as the less evil of the two, and to resist the bold and unwarranted design of the Clergy of the Church. This alliance, it is true, does not yet appear by any overt act of the contracting parties; but it is notorious that conjoint meetings have been holden for this express purpose, and that it actually does exist in intention.

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Nor is this all. It is not to be conceived that a people who are in the constant exercise of that animation and ardour which so peculiarly distinguishes Methodism from every other religious sect whatever, will tacitly suffer a preparation for war without striking the first blow themselves ; and they may strike it most successfully. If I be rightly informed, not less than a thousand actions may be brought against these *very conscientious Clergymen* and their brethren for *non-residence*, and consequent *abstinence from their duty* ; and that fines to no smaller an amount than *thirty thousand pounds* are expected to be the produce of such actions ; of which the moiety, being the portion allowed by the existing statute to their own share, may be employed either in opposing their

their adversaries, or in propagating the Gospel in their own way. Whether this would be altogether a generous conduct and a justifiable mode of defence on the part of the assailed, I will not stay to determine. But it is obvious, from the numerous levees with which the Bishop of London is daily thronged, and the incessant consultation and tumult maintained at Sion-College, that it is the species of warfare which seems to apply more than any other to the businesses and bosoms of the assailants.

What then, my Lord, should follow as the legitimate deduction from observations like these, but that the pious opposition now threatened is neither *necessary* nor *politic*, and that one injudicious friend to a cause, is of more de-

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What then, my Lord, should follow as the legitimate deduction from observations like these, but that the pious opposition now threatened is neither *necessary* nor *politic*, and that one injudicious friend to a cause, is of more de-

triment than a host of open and avowed enemies.

CURSITOR.

London, March 6, 1800.

N. B. One of the Methodist Preachers, Mr. Joseph Benson, having published an Answer to this said "REPORT," it might be well for your Lordship to read it, and hear what the Methodists have to say for themselves.—Mr. Benson's pamphlet is to be had at Mr. Butterworth's, Bookseller, in Fleet-street, price 6d.

Who has lately published, price 6d. "A Sermon on the Character and Duty of a Christian Minister, by Adam Clarke, Methodist Preacher."

By Mr. Benson's pamphlet, as well as by this sermon, it may be seen that all the Methodist Preachers are not such ignorant, vulgar persons, as the "Reverend Reporters" would have them to be represented.



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